

Deaf Culture Question of the Week – December 12 – 16, 2011

Bill Newell, Principal Washington School for the Deaf

When fingerspelling the letter “e” is formed with the thumb tucked into the palm and four fingers resting neatly on the thumb. (See picture)

True or False



Go to the bottom for the answer

Answer: “false” – The picture shows the “citation form” of the letter “e” of the Manual Alphabet; that is, the “dictionary form”. It is rarely how the letter is formed

in fluent fingerspelling. When the letter “e” is used in fingerspelling the linguistic property called assimilation (or sometimes referred to as co-articulation) will affect how it is formed. Assimilation means that the shape and finger configurations of letters that come before or after the letter “e” will affect how the letter “e” is formed. Take for example the word “knee”. The letter “n” in “knee” is formed with the first two fingers extended over the thumb. The double “e” that follows is formed with only the first two fingers perched on top of the thumb. The formation of the “n” has affected the formation of the “e”. The “e” has assimilated the two-finger formation of the “n”.

This phenomenon occurs in fluent fingerspelling with all of the letters of the manual alphabet. The handshape configurations that beginning signers learn are indeed the “citation form or dictionary form” for each of the letters but in fluent fingerspelling each of these handshape configurations for the letters are modified by the shapes of letters that occur before or after the letter.

Here is a very interesting YouTube video that shows a woman explaining about assimilation in American Sign Language and in British Sign Language.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4IGOt5rE3w>

Here is a site where you can practice reading fingerspelled words. You will notice that you are seeing citation formation of each of the letters. This is not representing fingerspelled words as they would occur in fluent fingerspelling. <http://asl.ms/> Too much practice “reading fingerspelling” at this website might lead to a false expectation with regard to how actual fingerspelling occurs in fluent ASL conversation.